

ELEMENT 640: STATE AIRPORT SYSTEM PLAN

01 INTRODUCTION

State Guide Plan Element 640, *State Airport System Plan*, was approved by the State Planning Council on June 14, 1984. The plan has been amended twice; first in 1984 and again in 1992. The 1984 amendment consisted of additions and clarifications to some sections of the Airport System Plan. The 1992 amendment replaced all references to the need for a new or expanded terminal at T.F. Green State Airport and replaced them with specific proposals for a new terminal, apron reconfiguration, improved highway access, redesign of internal traffic circulation patterns, and other various improvements.

The purpose of this element is to develop policies and recommendations for Rhode Island's state airport system for the period 1984 through 2004. The system includes six state-owned airports (the air carrier airport, T.F. Green, and five general aviation airports) and a heliport (see Figure 640(01)).

02 ISSUES ADDRESSED

Issues are presented in two sections of the plan, Parts 640.5, Airport Roles, and 640.6, Analysis of Issues. The issues are:

1. the roles of individual airports within the state system;
2. the need for facilities, such as runways, aprons, and operations buildings;
3. financing of the airport system, including both operating and capital costs;
4. the extent of state involvement in airports; and
5. state policy regarding airport land.

The material that follows is a summary discussion of these issues. The full text for each issue can be found on pages 5.1 to 5.13 and 6.1 to 6.60 of the plan.

A. Airport Roles

T.F. Green, the only air carrier airport, is classified by FAA as a "primary" (relatively busy) commercial service airport providing "medium range" (between 500 and 1,500 miles) service. Past studies done in Rhode Island justify the continuation of this role. T.F. Green has been found to have a strong market for medium and long-range air carrier service.

General aviation service is provided by all of the state airports. T.F. Green was projected as being capable of handling forecasted operations until at least 1995. North Central and Quonset serve as relievers for general aviation at T.F. Green. Quonset also has an important military role, as the base for two National Guard units.

Two other general aviation airports (Block Island and Westerly) provide scheduled commercial service. In terms of airport design category, Block Island and Newport are at the lowest level, basic utility. Westerly, like North Central, is in the general utility category, meaning that it can serve more types of airplanes, including those with faster landing speeds.

The brief analysis in the plan does not indicate an overwhelming case for upgrading the design category of any of the airports. This does not mean that no runway extensions or other modifications are needed; e.g., a new or a longer runway might be justified at Block Island for safety reasons. No new airports are needed to serve general aviation demand, however.

B. Facility Needs

Facility needs are reviewed in terms of the major kinds of facilities:

Runways (capacity, length, and orientation): The only runway capacity problem, based on forecasts, is for T.F. Green in the 1995-2005 time period. Block Island has a less than optimum runway orientation.

Taxiways: Taxiways need to be built or altered at most of the airports. Block Island and North Central seem to have the greatest needs.

Hanger and Apron Space: All of the general aviation airports show a need for more hangar space, especially Quonset. Insufficient apron space appears to be a problem at North Central and Block Island.

Airport Buildings: Operations buildings and garages are a universal need at the airports. (In accordance with the plan's recommendations, the needs of the passenger terminal for T.F. Green were evaluated and a terminal area plan was developed. In 1996 a new 300,000 square foot terminal was opened. Additionally, there is a new operations tower and emergency vehicle garage.) Block Island and Newport have totally obsolete operations buildings. The Westerly operations building was destroyed in a fire. Operations and terminal facilities are being conducted from a temporary building. Those at North Central and Quonset need rehabilitation. Because of garage location and design, the emergency vehicles at Newport, North Central, and Westerly do not have easy access to the airfield.

Airport Circulation and Parking: Circulation and parking needs have been identified at Block Island, and Westerly. Improvements to internal circulation and an increased number of parking spaces were part of the 1992 T.F. Green renovations.

Airport Access: Improved highway access was included in 1992 T.F. Green renovations.

C. Financing

Financing is discussed in terms of both capital and operating costs. At the time the plan was approved, a federal funding program for capital development had been authorized through 1987 with money earmarked for various purposes. It was provided on a matching basis (90 percent federal for many types of development). State bonds and appropriations were used as the match.

D. State Involvement

State involvement in the airport system has a long history. Four airports were developed by the state from the 1930's through the 1960's, and two airports (Quonset and Westerly) were turned over to the state after being developed by the Navy. Little municipal involvement has occurred.

Evaluation of several alternatives for the State's future involvement with airports (including privatization and closing or selling of airports) does not lead to any self-evident conclusions. (However, as a result of a study by the Governor's Office, the operation of the airport system was transferred from the Department of Transportation to the Rhode Island Airport Corporation in 1992). Each airport has some significance in terms of air service provided, economic development potential and past investment. T.F. Green has unique importance as an air carrier airport. Quonset has a special military role and serves as a reliever. Block Island is a critical transportation link and air ambulance base (connecting to Westerly). North Central provides important service as a reliever and a location for 120 based aircraft. Newport serves general aviation in that part of the state.

E. Airport Land

Airport land, its acquisition and disposal, is another policy issue for the state. The plan finds that most of the airports do not have excess land to dispose of. Quonset, especially, has little area for airport development. North Central and Westerly, over the years, have turned over substantial land for industrial development and now have little left for expansion or buffering.

Several airports may have land acquisition needs in the future. Block Island would need land if the runway was extended or a new one built. Block Island, T.F. Green, and Westerly could use land or easements off runway ends for prevention of obstructions.

03 OBJECTIVES

The broad objectives of the *State Airport System Plan* are set forth in part 640.7 (page 7.1). The objectives of the state airport system are as follows:

- provision of air transportation facilities and services for the public, at a level needed to meet travel demand, to complement other modes of transportation, and to assure safe and convenient operations;
- operation in an efficient and cost-effective manner, considering limited state resources;
- operation in a manner that is environmentally acceptable and that is as compatible as possible with the surrounding community;
- contribution to the state's economy, in terms of facilitating goods movement, offering convenient service for business and tourist passenger travel by commercial or private aircraft, enhancing the attractiveness of industrial sites, and supporting the tourist industry; and

- provision of air transportation facilities and services for the Rhode Island National Guard.

04 STRATEGIES

The material that follows is a summary discussion of the recommendations contained in this element of the State Guide Plan. The full text for each recommendation can be found in Chapters 7-2 to 7-8 on pages 7.1 to 7.20.

A. Airport Roles

Airport roles are recommended to continue as they are. The current roles and design categories are as follows:

Block Island:	commercial service, basic utility
T.F. Green:	primary commercial service, transport
Newport:	general aviation, basic utility
North Central:	reliever, general utility
Quonset:	reliever, transport
Westerly:	commercial service, general utility

B. Facilities Development

Facilities development recommendations in the plan consisted of a list of major needs for each airport (see Subsection 02 B above) and a completed development program for the next twenty years, in three phases. The program identifies projects and estimates their cost, by federal and state shares. The short-range (five-year) program lists forty projects at all of the airports, totaling over \$17 million. It is intended as a realistic program, not a "needs list." A sizeable amount is for vehicle replacement. The present Rhode Island Airport Corporation program as listed in the 1998 - 2000 Transportation Improvement Program has projects through 2004 totaling \$115 million.

C. Financing

Financing recommendations are among the most significant in the plan. One is to begin providing the state share of most development projects through the operating budget, at an annual appropriations level that would be in the range of \$500,000 - \$750,000. Another idea is to consider financing new operations buildings and garages through the Public Building Authority. The most important recommendation is to increase airport revenue collections so that they come closer to the amount spent for operating costs. One approach is to review and elevate the current fee structure; another is to develop new revenue sources such as an aviation fuel tax dedicated to airport purposes.

D. State Involvement

The Rhode Island Airport Corporation was established to operate the state airport system. The corporation replaced the direct state operation through the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Division of Airports.

E. Airport Land

One policy is that the state should not dispose of any more airport land. Possible future needs for land acquisition are pointed out in Chapter 640.6-4.

F. Data Collection

The Rhode Island Airport Commission should:

1. continue to strengthen its data collection program, emphasizing the submission of regular activity reports by airport users; and
2. consider changing its data categories to match the simpler categories used by FAA: itinerant and local, with breakdowns for air carrier, air taxi/commuter, and military. In the air taxi/commuter category, it would be helpful to have a breakdown for scheduled commercial service.

G. Issues for Future Study

The analysis in this Guide Plan Element suggests several issues that deserve further study as part of the continuous airport system planning process. These include:

1. a refined long-range capital development program, with a rigorous priority-setting system and a regular schedule for rehabilitation and replacement projects;
2. as more data and socioeconomic projections become available, revision of aviation activity forecasts as needed;
3. if warranted by changed conditions, a review of the roles of the individual airports; and
4. continuing coordination of airport master plans, as they are prepared, with the state airport system plan.